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Christine Bell: Against Reconciliation

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There has been some talk of the need for 'reconciliation' in Scotland post referendum. For those who view reconciliation as something we practise all the time, everywhere, this is not too disturbing. But most people think of this call as something different - a call for special that Scotland now needs that it did not before.

I have found myself resistant to this language, and enter the debate late because I needed to think through why. Here I try to articulate my thoughts.

First, to call for reconciliation presumes hurt and damage. I know what this looks like in Northern Ireland, but I wonder should we really concede that finding out people's desires as regards separate statehood, and that the arguments that are made as to independence versus 'better together' are hurtful or damaging?

I would prefer that we acknowledge that these are matters on which reasonable people may reasonably disagree, and celebrate and value what has been an important process of public deliberation.

Perhaps we should even celebrate that Scotland forms one of the few global examples of how this discussion can take place without violence. Indeed for many peace processes around the world - a referendum with peaceful and sensible public debate using a free media, and followed by a free and fair vote, seems an unbelievably harmonious way of conducting business.

Sure, before this is over there will have been intemperate language by a few people on a few occasions. Trolling will have happened on twitter, as it does every day anyway - and worse it seems if you propose women on banknotes. And more seriously, this is an emotional issue as well as a political one, with friends and families finding themselves on different sides of the vote. All emotional debates need a process of recovery of the relationship.

But this is not the American Civil War, and on the whole sensible political debate has sensibly tried to articulate what is at stake in the choice. It should not be shut down by over-anxiety as regards polarisation that exists more as future fear than present reality.

Second, 'reconciliation' as some sort of communal inter-personal post-referendum cathartic need, under the guardianship of the churches, risks obscuring more practical notions of political accommodation to whatever new reality results, which do need to be thought through. These include, how political parties will receive and react to the news; and whether and on what terms negotiations will be opened - whether for the shape of a new state or for a new re-articulated narrative of union. How inclusive will either process be, of those who wanted something different, but also for those - particularly women it would seem - who found neither side's definition of the country to address their concerns.

Despite calling this piece 'Against Reconciliation', let me be clear. If the Church of Scotland or others, want to have a service, that is fine. Perhaps even useful and good: symbolic social markers of the end of something and the beginning of something else can be important - hence weddings and funerals.

For Re-imagining

However, perhaps we need not a service of reconciliation but a service of 're-imagining'.

I say this because I strongly feel, from the experience of Northern Ireland, that two matters are rarely sufficiently understood as to how communal conflict escalates and sustains.

First, that on the back of fear and talk of polarisation and violence, intemperate or even violent actors can feel that they have licence to fulfil prophecies of doom. Polarisers of evil intent do not need endorsement or active support from the rest of us; they will find a way to operate on our passive acceptance of the inevitability of conflict and our failure to actively talk a different language and hold onto a different way of being. Inventive and optimistic language may seem like a feeble tool in the face of divisive intent and actions, but language creates realities in powerful and underestimated ways. Finding ways to re-defining and re-frame conflict is incredibly important - everywhere all of the time.

Second, the very term reconciliation constantly thrusts us into the past, and suggests that matters were conciled in the first place. But of course, politics exists because contestation exists. This is the spice of life. When I first went from Northern Ireland to study in England, I was amazed that in the students' union people could have a fractious and even bitter debate, and then go off for a drink afterwards. Reasonable people can indeed reasonably disagree, and conflict can be handled peacefully: understanding and enacting this puts light years of difference between violent and non-violent societies. Scotland should remain confident of where it stands on that spectrum.

In conclusion this is my plea, for what it is worth.

Let's not call for wringing of hands and apologies, for expressing strong views on important political matters, even post-referendum. Rather, let's call on Scotland's poets, writers, artists, faith communities, politicians, family members, to help us re-imagine a future that accepts that on-going political difference is inevitable and even important. Is this not more important than burying it as part of an exceptional past moment, or trying to inaugurate a forced marriage?

Whatever country we find ourselves in on the 19th September, let Scotland testify to the fact that ground-shaking debates can indeed shake the ground, disturb, provoke, and even divide, and still be peacefully resolved by elections to little lasting serious, damage, hurt and division beyond the business of politics -disagreement-as-usual. Let it create a new language of inclusion, that celebrates political and national differences rather than attempting to reconcile them or bury them.

That would be quite a global contribution to make, and the world that is watching would sit up and take note. And rightly so.

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